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LETTER

TO THE

Aug. 19. 95

Reverend Joseph Priestley, LL.D. F.R.S.

OCCASIONED BY HIS

LATE ADDRESS

TO THE

INHABITANTS OF BIRMINGHAM.

BIRMINGHAM,

PRINTED FOR THE BOOKSELLERS.

MDCCXCL

AS the following LETTER is intended, in some measure, to be a kind of explanatory comment upon the "Address" which gave rise to it, it has been thought proper, for the greater convenience of occasional reference, to reprint that Address, which is accordingly subjoined.

T O

The Reverend Joseph Priestley, LL.D.F.R.S.

Reverend Sir,

THE injuries which you have lately sustained as a literary man, and as a member of private and domestic society, are, I presume, with every friend to science, with every man of honest and unblunted feelings, a subject of deep and sincere regret ; and, if you think as favourably as I do of the human heart, you will not doubt that many, who, like me, differ widely from you in questions of no trifling import, will yet rejoice to know that your mind, far from sinking under its burthen, resists the pressure of distress with manly fortitude. Perhaps no man, professing to labour for the service of his species, has erred, in that view, more widely than yourself. But with your speculative errors I pretend not to interfere ; and

if I have some errors in practice to lay to your charge, I hope I shall not so urge them, as to betray any uncharitable or disrespectful judgment of your intellectual or moral character. If, in reading the following remarks, any thing which rises within your own breast should convert that into reproach, which was only meant to challenge your assent, I need not apologize for that pain which I should not have inflicted, but by a very pardonable misconception of your principles and designs. Under the immediate impression of losses, such as those which you have experienced, some warmth, some acrimony of expression, may easily be overlooked. To complain without restraint, however unsuitable to the dignity of philosophy, is the allowed privilege of distress. It was therefore wisely and laudably intended by you, when you sat down to address the "Inhabitants of Birmingham," to maintain with stoical firmness, the energy of that character with which the consent of mankind had invested you. Unhappily for you, you have extended your expostulation beyond that length to which your patience would extend. There are, indeed, in your first paragraphs, notwithstanding your care to check the indignant sallies of a wounded spirit, some very inflammatory, and, I hope and believe, unauthorized assertions, which your cooler judgment,

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if you had given it time to operate, might have prompted you to suppress. But, having once suffered your pen to trace the name of Mr. MADAN, you seem, from that instant, totally to have lost sight of your intended decorum, and many of your succeeding sentences bear but too near an affinity to declamation and abuse. You have even risen into your accustomed language of menace. After this profuse indulgence of your resentment, the sudden changes in your conclusion, to christian meekness and primitive charity, is by far too abrupt, too inconsistent, to sink into our minds with due effect.

Such are the reflections which the general style and temper of your address has naturally excited. Had it not contained, or implied, positions which call loudly for refutation, had it not tended grossly to mislead the public mind, you might, at the present juncture, and as far as concerns myself, have argued without answer, and proclaimed your wrongs without interruption. If the intemperate zeal of the reformer had provoked hostility, the sufferings of the individual must have insured compassion. But it would be a very blameable forbearance tacitly to allow, as fact, what is infamy, if admitted, and, at the same time, such an insult to justice and candour, as few, I believe, of the basest champions of a party, would have

ventured to offer. And though I mean to pass by many assumptions, which are sufficiently controvertible, confining myself to such only as it seems necessary to controvert, yet these alone bear so large a proportion to the whole matter of your address, that, for the sake of method, I shall begin with your beginning, and follow you to your conclusion.

No emotions of surprise, or of disapprobation, are at first excited, by reading at the head of your address, these plain words, "To the Inhabitants of Birmingham." But, as we proceed in the perusal, we discover, with astonishment, the cloud of inconsistency and obscurity in which those few syllables have involved you. In the carelessness of oral communication, it might have been natural and excusable to have said, that the *Birmingham* people had risen and destroyed your property. But how, Sir, could it escape you, that, when that time is given for reflection, between the first heat of anger and the publication of your sentiments, which the intervention of a printer entitles us to suppose, you must be expected to adopt more discriminate terms? There is not, indeed, in the world, any one body of men, to whom all that you have thought proper to say, could naturally or consistently be addressed. The turn of many expressions, leads us to understand them

them as directed to that comparatively small number of persons, by whose furious and mistaken zeal your manuscripts, instruments, &c. were actually demolished. Had those acts of violence, indeed, been no more than the execution of a deliberate plan, formed by a very great majority of your "late Townsmen and Neighbours," though I should still execrate and abhor their mode of proceeding, as turbulent and illegal, as brutal and savage, yet I should take it, in that case, as a strong proof that your character and conduct amongst them had been eminently obnoxious. The multitude, when unanimous, seldom or never err. You know Sir, the old maxim, *Vox populi, vox Dei*. If you grant, that (at the moment of writing those sentences) you had in contemplation only the actual perpetrators of the outrages in question, I think you cannot, on reflection, but agree with me, that all reasoning and expostulation must be misplaced in that quarter; and that, in offenders of that class, no compunction is to be excited, unless by the executive justice of their country.

But by far the greater share of your criminatory fulminations, is totally inapplicable to an ignorant multitude. We must then suppose it pointed at the better informed members of the established church, or at such of them as are inhabitants of

Birmingham; to whom you, by a very harsh and unjust implication, attribute an acquiescence, at least, in ravages, which, I will not scruple to assert, none of them beheld, few ever heard of, without grief and horror. If, Sir, you believed this, I must ascribe your belief to the prejudices of a mind habituated, from the consciousness of a confirmed and deeply-rooted aversion, to regard the orthodox members of that church as implacable adversaries. If you have endeavoured to insinuate into the minds of others, an opinion of malice in those men, which you did not yourself entertain, I leave you to settle that account between God and your own conscience.

From other passages in your address, one might imagine, that the persons whom you see in the most inimical point of view, are the friends of the British constitution, as it now stands, unaltered, and not yet (I thank Providence) resolved into a democracy. For whilst you affect to stand aloof from those, whose exultation on account of the Revolution in France has been so publicly, I may add, so extravagantly expressed, you do not scruple to declare your approbation of their wishes for, I will not say, a similar, but for an equivalent change in the government of this country. You soften it, indeed, into "such an improvement of our own constitution, as all sober citizens,

"of

"of every persuasion, have long wished for." You well knew, that at this period, the word *Revolution* (as applied to any future new-modelling of our Church and State) is become ominous. But let us collect the sentiments of these celebrators of the anniversary of Gallic Liberty (say rather, of Gallic Anarchy) by a fair construction of the language of their own toasts, as published by themselves; and then how far will this "improvement," as it is called, appear to fall short of a Revolution, or to merit the good wishes of any "sober citizen?" Let me not be told, that this is not a fair, but a forced, construction. It is well known that the toasts of political clubs, when intended for publication, are often taken by themselves in a laxer, or in a stricter sense (as occasion serves) than that which was designed to meet the eye of the world: and it is obvious enough, that the list of toasts to be given at the late Anglo-gallic meeting at Birmingham, must have been framed and worded, under such peculiar circumstances, with the most attentive and deliberate caution.

In conformity with the heterogeneous groupes both of friends and of adversaries, which seem to have floated upon your imagination in different parts of your address, your use of the pronouns "we" and "you" appears vague and desultory;

so that, whom you accuse, and what is the extent of your accusation; whom you would represent as persecuted, and what event of that persecution you would teach us to look for with trembling expectation, is not always easy to be determined. With singular felicity of confusion, you have blended yourself, and your suffering friends, with the whole body of Presbyterians; these, again, with all* other Dissenters, and the friends of liberty, with the friends of a faction. On the other hand, you have confounded Mr. Madan, and "others," with all the clergy of the town; the clergy, with their respective congregations; and the supporters of the establishment, with a mob. This, surely, is mixing *sacra profanis*, and making common cause with a vengeance. Excuse the vulgarity; it is expressive, and the refinements of politer phraseology will not furnish me with an equivalent.

When you speak of the miraculous increase of defenders of your cause, which would not

* It is presumed that *all Dissenters*, as such, are not of course suspected, much less represented, as *enemies* to the present Government. But when large bodies of them, in every part of the kingdom, publicly meet, and declare their political sentiments, we may surely take advantage of that information which they force upon us, and venture to assert, that *many* of them are, at the best, very *suspicious friends* to it.

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fail to spring up, as it were, from the viperine teeth of its martyrs, it appears doubtful whether you would direct our expectation to a crop of Unitarian saints, or of democratic heroes. Perhaps of both united. Even in that case I cannot think that these earth-born champions would need the arm of a Cadmus to discomfit them; like their mythologic archetypes, they would fall, self-subdued, by internal discord. But here, Sir, I, for one, enter my protest against your imaginary martyrdom. Had you died by the fury of the populace, I could not, on that score, consent to your enrollment amongst the martyrs of either religious or civil liberty. You would only have lost your life by promoting, with indiscrete activity, innovation and derangement in that, which (unless you could provide priests and magistrates exempt from the common frailties of humanity) is already too well constituted to admit of any solid or effectual amendment. I am persuaded too, that the majority of the Dissenters would have been far from regarding you as a martyr to their cause, or from regretting your loss as a political man; in the pursuit of their long-sought objects, they have guides enough to direct them, and demagogues enough to head them; your forward and restless zeal does but precipitate what, they think, might better be left to time, and endanger their
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cause, by premature declarations of confidence in designs yet unripe for execution.

I am here guilty of some small digression, but I have been led into it by a very natural course of thought, amidst my endeavours to unravel the intricacies of that ambiguity which the universality of the superscription has introduced into your arguments, and to seize the *amphisbœna* at both ends. But that must be reserved for stronger hands. You have rolled yourself up in an impenetrable coat of uncertainty; and, in my attempts to combat your sophistry, I can only take a conjectural aim, and strike, as it were, hap-hazard, at your vulnerable part.

To any other writer, the plea of haste might, on such an occasion, readily be allowed, and he might secure himself from the charge of intentional perplexity under the shelter of acknowledged inaccuracy; but, to Dr. Priestley, the rapidity of whose pen, long practised in almost extemporary composition, has often excited the wonder of the public, we cannot hold out an indulgence which might be expected with an equal shew of reason, for so large a proportion of his voluminous works.

I now return, Sir, to observe, that in the beginning of your letter, you lay strong claim to the character of a man of *meek* and *peaceable* deportment.

ment. If you arrogate this species of praise as due to your private conduct only, far be it from me to wish to rob you of it. As an ecclesiastic, as a politician, perhaps another character might fit you better. Your unwearied diligence and incessant labours to render the religious principles of all, within the sphere of your activity, as unsettled as you have professed your own to be, are ill adapted to promote the general peace and good order of the community. Nor do they afford a better hope of securing, to your disciples, the internal peace of their own minds. By imprudently attempting to reverse the polarity of their belief, you only weaken or confuse it, and make them incapable of being uniformly attracted towards any center of faith. Your assiduous flattery of all seceders in general, particularly of that description who are commonly called Methodists, may have a very peaceable tendency, as far as respects them, but must be regarded by us as raising forces to storm openly that fortress which you have long laboured to undermine.

Some, however, of your partizans, less cautious than yourself, though not too remote for the suspicion of their being *peculiarly open* to your influence and direction, are said to have spoken out in very alarming, and very intelligible language; and to have declared their wishes, nay, their
warm

warm hopes of the subversion both of the civil and ecclesiastical government of this country. But, I trust, whenever, whether at public meetings, or in private companies, they again attempt to sound the disposition of their respective neighbourhoods, they will find few such enthusiasts in the rage of innovation, as to expect any advantages to the community from the introduction of a Presbytery into the one, or the abolition of Royalty in the other.

As to yourself, Sir, your order is pacific. When a man of your profession represents his own conduct as *remarkably* inoffensive, he prompts us to consider in what form and manner it might be possible for him, without an open renunciation of all respect to decency, to manifest a disposition to violence and contention. And here, our view is at once directed to the pulpit and the press, as the appropriate stations on which the forces of a clerical warrior must be posted, and from whence alone he can annoy his antagonists. Upon one or other of these stations, you, Sir, I think, are always to be found armed *cap-a-pie*, and from hence you have kept up a warm and continual fire. You first made yourself enemies by wantonly discharging random shots: it must be owned, however, that you had always a battery ready to open against any one whom your excursive sallies might urge
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to attack you. Whether you have always loaded fairly, and according to the laws of honourable war, may indeed be a question, which, however, I shall not, at present, agitate; but before I drop my allusion, I cannot help observing, that you have often reminded me of a garrison, who, having expended all their shot, continued, in bravado, to fire *powder*. Surely, Sir, you will not deny that you have shewn yourself susceptible of no common degree of pleasure in *provoking*, and in *prolonging*, controversy; that you have frequently treated your opponents with an asperity which, however common, is not the more becoming; and, in particular, that you have expressed your inveteracy against the clergy of Birmingham in as striking a manner, as if you had declared war against them in all the forms.

In the address which lies before me, you accuse them (and probably you meant to include in the accusation many other members of their church) of continual *railing* against the Dissenters. I shall find another opportunity of meeting this charge. What I shall here advert to, is the singular use which you make of it. You pretend to suppose, that the perpetrators of the late riots were wrought up by these same railings, to the pitch which was necessary to set them in action. Have you not then allowed, in another part of your

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address,

address, that this sudden blaze of popular fury might be the casual effect of an anonymous *hand-bill*? In that one point, would they avow their honest opinion, I believe, all men of all parties are agreed, that the hand-bill alluded to, unfortunately coinciding in point of time with a meeting composed of persons, in whose party it was suspected to originate, was, by that fortuitous circumstance, the chief and immediate cause of the confusion which followed. Yet it was, and is still, a very general opinion, that if the projectors of that meeting had prudently desisted from their purpose (their perseverance in which *is said* to have been effected by the determined bigotry, not of yourself, but of *another* individual) the public peace might have been preserved, and every habitation that was plundered might have stood, at this instant, untouched and entire.

You, Sir, may well know, that you was not the object of popular revenge as a dissenting minister, as the Apostle of Unitarianism, no, not even (if any confidence had been placed in the *moderation* of your intended measures) as the persevering advocate for the necessity of a reformation in our Church and State; but as one of those persons, from whose machinations they (however erroneously) did certainly apprehend some violent and immediate convulsion in both. You may well know

know also, that the far greater part of the actors in that scene of desolation could not be supposed capable of being excited by any principles, even that of over-heated enthusiasm. They were wretches who would have been equally ready, upon a very frivolous pretence, to make havock of *your* property, or of *mine*; women of the most abandoned character; men instigated by those women to plunder and pillage; and children to whom riot was but sport. Such, Sir, is the description of persons whom you have either honoured with an address on their *own* account, or considered as fair representatives of the "Inhabitants of Birmingham" at large. It does not, however, appear to me that any *railings* or revilings, even though they had been (as you represent) maliciously and assiduously employed, could be sufficient to mislead a whole people, or, indeed, any considerable number of persons, in their opinion, either of you, of your friends, or of the general mass of Dissenters. Railing is a kind of rhetoric of but slender effect. Even the lowest of the people, when they are to be persuaded in any question of importance, love to have the compliment of a reason, and to be thought capable of being convinced. Nor were they more likely, in the case before us, to be the dupes of sophistry and misrepresentation; when the party misrepresented

must have been present, with equal vigilance, with at least equal abilities, and (permit me to add) equally unshackled by any scruples of delicacy, to defend himself.

I submit to your consideration, whether you do not, on this occasion, place too little confidence in the efficacy of those arguments in behalf of yourself and your doctrines, which heretofore you took so much pains to impress upon the minds of your "late townsmen;" and ascribe too extensive an effect to the efforts of your opponents. Do you really think, Sir, that *their* reasoning, wit, and eloquence has been so irresistibly persuasive; *your own*, so weak and ineffectual? Yes; for the present you *seem* to think so. I must produce your own words, "You have been led to consider any "injury done to us as a meritorious thing." But this was not strong enough to satisfy you. A little lower we find it thus improved: "In * *destroying* "us, you have been led to think, *you did* God and "your country the most substantial *service*." Let me here point out to you the ambiguity of the word "led." If, by "led to think," you *mean* *betrayed by their own ignorance into that misapprehension of their duty*, no objection lies against this expression, excepting the probability, that they *did*

* The Italics here are your own.

not think so; that they did not misapprehend their duty; that, in fact, they never thought at all about their duty. And, though you so kindly give them credit for motives of mistaken piety; for the belief that their object was right (because that allowance best corresponds with *your* account of the means by which their "bigotry was excited" to so high a pitch) yet I appeal to common sense to decide, whether the few of them who could have any motive beyond that of plunder; were not rather actuated by a view of inflicting a sort of anticipated retaliation on a set of men, from whom *they* apprehended their friends to be in danger of similar insults. But if by the term "led" you meant (as I see, with regret, it is too probable that you did) *purposely and studiously persuaded* to think so, this is deplorably misjudging both of the effect, and the design, of all that their "teachers," or their "superiors" could ever address to them. It is not only ascribing an incredible influence to a few ordinary parish-church discourses, and pamphlets of a day; but it is also attributing to the Clergy, and other liberally educated members of our church, a degree of savage ferocity, which I should be sorry and ashamed to have laid to the charge of the supporters of any church now in the christian world.

To your bold and flaming allegation—that the “superiors” of the people have made a “frequent practice” of drinking “confusion and damnation” to you, no adequate answer can be made, in terms which one gentleman would chuse to direct to another. At the moment of writing this I am so far unable to speak from authentic information, that I have not thought it worth while to make the most cursory enquiry, whether some *bot-headed individual*, some *drunken party* at a late hour of night, might not *possibly*, in a *single instance*, have been guilty of that blasphemy and indecency. Fact, or not fact, it is of little moment to either cause. Such things *may* happen, in all societies, amongst every denomination of men; but I hope and believe, that they rarely *do* happen in any. To prove a negative is always difficult; in such cases, impossible. But, that this has been a *frequent practice*, that it has even occurred at all in any company of men in their senses, is utterly incredible. Supposing, however, that this, in one, two, or three instances, and in companies composed of several persons, had actually happened, is it fair, from such irregularities, to infer the spirit of a numerous party, or even the serious sentiments of a single soul? Such charges can only be intended to shake off the supineness, and to rouse the indignation of such of your brethren, as shew them-

themselves, in your apprehension, but lukewarm in the *glorious* cause. But I dismiss the topic. The degree of credit due to such arguments is plain enough upon the very face of them. I hope we shall now hear no more of a possibility, much less of an intention on their part, that the professional labours of the clergy, or the convivial sallies of the gentry, of our church, should have contributed to inflame the passions of the lower orders of the people, or to occasion those devastations which we all equally lament.

After displaying your insight into the motives which induced the inhabitants of Birmingham (as you say) or rather the populace (as you *ought* to have said) to lay waste the houses and property of yourself, and certain other Dissenters, you proceed to set forth your apprehensions of their malicious designs in regard to your person. On that subject, Sir, I have little to say; and, in saying that little, I shall ill satisfy myself if I do not keep clear of every thing which might wear the most distant aspect of personal ill-will. I can have no pleasure in wounding the feelings of one, whose mind seems to dwell upon the mortifying supposition, that the sacrifice of his life would have been a gratification to a numerous party, amongst those of his countrymen to whom he was best known.

As a stranger at Birmingham, as not having been there at that distressing crisis, I will not interfere with notions of the extent to which the rage of a lawless mob might have been carried. Yet I would willingly contribute my little to relieve you from those disagreeable impressions, which a violent emotion of terror is apt to leave upon the mind; particularly in those who imagine their lives to have been providentially snatched out of the very jaws of destruction. I should be happy to confirm the *faint* hope which you intimate, that *murder* was not in the thoughts of those people. I have not any where heard that any of them uttered threats to that purpose; though, in other matters, they were all ready enough to declare their intentions. Seldom, indeed, do we hear of *any* multitude, even of *Englishmen*, collected for the avowed purpose of revenge, so cautious of injury to the persons of their supposed enemies. If, as I have been told, they burnt a scare-crow effigy, intended to represent you, I believe that was rather meant to signify disrespect, than a brutal thirst for your life—a life, which I hope will long be spared to you; not only for the advancement of science, but that you may at length see how unfortunately your endeavours have been directed to increase the general stock of content and happiness. I would gladly persuade myself that you will

will sometime be sensible how far it is possible for men to be mistaken, in estimating the nature of their own views: that you will perceive wherein your love of fame may have interfered with your love of your country; and to what degree you may have been led away by the ambition of displaying those talents, in the ample field of religion and politics, which had secured to you so brilliant a reputation in the more humble, but safer walk of experimental philosophy. If ever that time arrives, we shall probably see you dedicating the remainder of your days to the healing, as far as in you lies, of the breaches which you have made in society. You will then gladly assist in undoing what you have done, and in re-settling what you have unsettled; and in restoring, if it be yet possible, to your country, and to the town of Birmingham in particular, that peace and unanimity which you have so largely contributed to take away.

As to those individuals, whoever they were, who were instrumental to the collecting of a mob, and guiding its fury to violate the sanctuaries of domestic peace, I perfectly agree with you, that *your* "feelings," amidst the wreck of your property, were far preferable to the "disposition" which led *them* to "spoil your goods:" I will add

also, to *their feelings*, whenever they begin to see their conduct in a true light. But I indulge a hope that you will, in due time, publicly acknowledge your sorrow and concern, that the irritation of a mind, smarting under the strong and lively sense of recent losses and disappointments, should have misled you to attribute that unchristian disposition, of which you profess so just an abhorrence, to the inhabitants of Birmingham in general.

Of your library and philosophical apparatus, particularly of the latter, the loss must be universally considered in so serious a light, that thousands, no doubt, will join in the wish that it could have been their enviable lot to rescue them from destruction. I should have included your manuscripts, *à fortiori*: but, in them, a distinction must be made between the theological and political tracts, and such as might be the result of your scientific pursuits. In the latter, if you should never be able to reimbody their contents, it is not only yourself, and the friends of science in this country, but the whole learned world, that has suffered a heavy and irreparable loss. As to the *former*, you will not wonder that (thinking as I do of the effects of those which have already seen the light) instead of lamenting their consignment to darkness and oblivion, I should rather look upon it

it as a favourable event to the happiness of mankind.

I do not undertake to prove or discover in what quarter the infamous *hand-bill* was fabricated; time, perhaps, may shew. I will only endeavour to demonstrate what probably might have been the effect of it, had it gained the concurrence, instead of rousing the indignation of the people. Whoever procured that paper to be dispersed, not only in Birmingham, but (if I am not egregiously misinformed) in places very remote from each other, seems to have concluded, or to have hoped at least, that the assertions which it contained, were no more than opinions which the majority of the people secretly held, but were, hitherto, afraid to avow. The object was, apparently, by means of the discussions which the paper would introduce, to make them acquainted with each others sentiments, and to give them courage from a sense of their strength. A majority disposed to enforce their opinions by violence, want only a leader to head them, and a day fixed on which to act. A day was there fixed, and had the majority been indeed *so disposed*, I fear leaders enough would too easily have been found.

It is impossible not to suspect that, on the fourteenth day of July, after the dissemination of that execrable hand-bill, whatever kind of impression
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it had made, the public peace could not have been maintained. In vain, Sir, might you, and those who listen to your dictates, have recommended to the furious revolutionists, not to seem to affect the attainment of power by *any means*; far less to alarm their loyal fellow-subjects by appearances of *fever*. The mounds of tranquillity must have been broken; the question was, which way the torrent would flow. That day was indeed dreadfully distinguished. It will ever be remembered in the town of Birmingham, as a day that gave a beginning to devastations, which every good and honest man, of whatever party, recollects with grief and horror. But the mischief, on *this side*, was partial; on the *other side*, it might have been general. Do you suppose, Sir, that an entire change in the civil and ecclesiastical government of this country, the transfer of allegiance from the sovereign to the people, the reduction of royalty to a cypher, and of the nobility to private citizens; the seizure of the revenues of the clergy, and perhaps too, the abolition of episcopacy—do you suppose, I say, that all this could have been effected, or even attempted, in this country, without giving rise to the most universal and deplorable scene of plunder and bloodshed, of anarchy and confusion? I need not point out to an Englishman the dreadful consequences of

of an equality of forces in civil conflict. A late well-known Revolution (productive, at the best, as yet, of no very enviable effects) has indeed, hitherto, been carried on without plunging the nation, in which it took place, into the miseries of an actual state of war. Is not this easily accounted for? *That* nation, confessedly labouring under every species of oppression, was unanimous in an exertion to relieve itself. *Here* the case would be far otherwise. If there ~~are~~ abuses in our government, surely they are not such as to minister that fuel to the flame of discontent, or kindle that general spirit of enthusiastic resistance, which would bear down all before it, and complete a revolution without a contest! We have no tyranny to overthrow, no Bastille to pull down, no *Lettres de Cachet* to suppress; the revenues of our clergy, though not very equally divided, are, on the average, not more than sufficient for their decent support; our commonalty is, if not equally, tolerably represented; and the privileges of our nobility are so confined, that, were not men "but children of a larger growth," the bauble of peerage would barely be accepted at the hands of the sovereign.

You see, Sir, how widely I differ from your opinion, that the mischief which has been done, is "infinitely more" than what the hand-bill alluded

loded to could have occasioned. I hear it is intended to be said, or rather, it is already whispered about, that this hand-bill was contrived and circulated by some friend of the Church, purposely to raise the popular cry against the Dissenters. It may be a ridiculous condescension to reply seriously to such a suggestion. The Church may have its friends in *Bedlam*, or friends who *ought* to be there; but scarcely a madman, who could think of publishing a libel with such views, would hazard so perilous an experiment. Are the principles of a populace so steady? Is their loyalty, their attachment to the Church, so far to be relied on? A friend to the establishment would have guarded, with more caution, against so evident a possibility, that the seditious rhapsody, uttered in his assumed character, might take the wrong turn, gain serious partizans, and operate against himself.

I am now arrived at a part of your address, which reminds me of your charge against the clergy of the Church in Birmingham; that they have been guilty of continual railing against the Dissenters. You here support it, by instancing Mr. MADAN, and "others," as having been the authors of "gross and unprovoked calumnies" against yourself. To all these general and particular accusations, I cannot undertake to make
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an effectual and satisfactory reply. Little positive asseveration can be hazarded upon this subject, by one who has not had the least opportunity of hearing either the professional discourses of those gentlemen, or their private conversations; and who, of course, has no dependence but upon the recollection and accuracy of others.

Instead of making assertions upon such grounds, I shall rather submit to you the following questions :—Is it not the duty of every pastor to check, as far as he can, the progress of opinions which he holds to be pernicious, and to guard his flock from the contagion of dangerous principles? Could any thing more effectually induce the members of our Church to take alarm at your proceedings, than a bare repetition, in many instances, of your own words? Are not some of your doctrines such, as must appear to almost every sect of christians, nothing short of blasphemy? If those doctrines have sometimes issued forth from your pulpit, or in your publications, clothed, too, in such language as reflected on them an additional tint of indecency, is he blameable—is he not praise-worthy, who holds them up to general observation? Is the general character of Mr. MADAN, or of any “others” of the clergy in Birmingham, from whom you have met with opposition, such as to warrant a suspicion, that,
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if they had occasion to controvert your positions, or to censure your conduct, they would condescend to lean upon falshood, where truth would not support them, or have recourse to "gross and unprovoked calumnies?" Finally, are those terms applicable to any of their expressions to which you can refer? If you can answer these questions, with such proofs as will justify your allegations, I shall leave the further defence of Mr. MADAN, and his associates, to better-informed heads, and abler hands—to themselves.

I should have left the Dissenters (or whatever body it may be, to which you join yourself by the word "we") in full possession of the character which you give them, of being well instructed in the *mild and forbearing* spirit of christianity, if you had not appeared to institute an invidious comparison, in this respect, between them and the Church of England. Trust me, Dr. PRIESTLEY, there is not, there is not indeed, that kind of difference, either in doctrine or principle, between the members of the Established Church and those who dissent from it, which must of necessity dispose the one party to violence and persecution, the other to mildness and forbearance. The causes of a peaceable, or turbulent, of an imperious, or submissive conduct, in any sect or denomination of men, are generally to be sought for
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in sources very different from the tenets of their respective creeds. Such is the frailty of human nature, that when one party of men wants an advantage, however trifling, which another possesses, and will not *part with*, nothing on earth, except conscious weakness in the deprived party, will, generally speaking, prevent a recourse to violence. I believe Sir, as much as I believe any thing, which is neither a subject of mathematical demonstration, nor derives its certainty from a still more authentic source, that if the Dissenters (I here take that term in your own limited sense of it) if the Dissenters knew their own numbers and influence to be such, as would ensure success to the attempt, they would not scruple to avail themselves of their strength, to overturn, *by whatever means*, the Church of England, and to set up the Presbytery in her stead.

I do not fear to be accused, on account of what I have here said, of any particular prejudice against the Dissenters. They would hold it to be their *duty* to act thus. Convinced that the "object was right," they too might think that "the means could not be wrong." "In destroying" the present Establishment, they might think that "they did God and their country the most substantial service." I would here venture to ask, *What indulgence would then be shown to the ejected Church?*

Church? To what purposes the TYTHES would most probably be appropriated? What advantages the Quakers, and some other Sectaries, but more particularly the ROMAN CATHOLICS, might look for in the change? But, that I could not well expect to be entrusted with a solution of my queries; and moreover, should I again adopt the interrogatory form, I may perhaps be told, that questions are no argument; that any man may ask such as no man can answer.

There are, doubtless, many serious persons of your persuasion, who are either satisfied with their present share of liberty and privilege, or, at least, convinced that their present restrictions are not such as to justify any acts of violence, or factious combination, for the purpose of removing them. In Birmingham, particularly, I believe that there are many, and those the most eminent Dissenters, of that moderate and liberal turn. Observe, Sir, I do not mean by the word "eminent," *conspicuous as leaders of party*, for that is quite a different affair. Of some such men I have had, for many years, a personal knowledge; and I am happy to declare, that there are few persons in the world of whose private character I think more highly, or whose interests I would more readily serve. As far, indeed, as I have been informed, the general character of the Dissenters in Birmingham,

ham, before your residence there, was that of quiet and inoffensive men, who, in the social walks of life, went hand in hand with their neighbours of the Church, in an uniform intercourse of familiarity and benevolence. Nor is a recent instance wanting, of a propriety in their conduct at once manly and conciliating. In the *Birmingham Gazette* of Monday last, I see an address of thanks, by which "*the Dissenters*" of that place (for it is conceived in general terms) have at the same time done justice to their townsmen, and credit to themselves. In their opinions of public concerns, plain and unassuming men, such as compose the bulk of mankind, are very apt to be led by the most forward talkers, and the busiest writers. But I think, Sir, if I may judge by the tone and spirit of your address, I see proof enough that you was neither personally present, nor consulted by letter, when *their* advertisement was drawn up. Yet, in truth, you, whose property was first attacked, and the greater part of it destroyed before the general hurry and consternation had given time to the magistrates or inhabitants to take effectual measures for protecting it, have no more reason than any other Dissenter, to suspect a voluntary deficiency on their part. On the contrary, I am told that, from some of your neighbours, you received, on that occasion,

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very substantial services. I shall not hesitate, therefore, to profess my opinion, that those Dissenters who chose rather to thank their townsmen for that which was saved, than to reproach them for that which was destroyed, have enabled the world to draw a line of honourable distinction between themselves and Dr. Priestley. Persecution for religious opinions is, as you justly represented it, as impolitic as it is detestable. But, if the members of our Church, residing in Birmingham, do really wish, as you have often stated the case, to overwhelm, crush, and annihilate their poor helpless neighbours of the Meeting-house, depend upon it, though they may civilly thank you for your intention, in setting before them that useful caution, they are far from standing in need of it. On the other hand (so unfortunately have you thrown away your remark) the mob, who *do* persecute you, will not apply, nor even understand it. A mob is a master of many heads, indeed, but not, on that account, of the better judgment.

Let us see, however, after you have told us what will *not* do, what methods you would recommend, as those which might serve our cause. "Answer our arguments," you say, "and your business is done." The friends of the Church, Sir, have not all lost the use of memory. That
faculty

faculty sufficiently informs them, that, if they *do* answer your arguments to *their own* satisfaction, or to that of indifferent persons, they must not hope to *convince*, much less to *silence*, those who are deeply interested in believing them unanswerable. In return for this your kindness, in lavishing advice where it is unhappily either lost, or superfluous, I will also display my liberality, by offering a few hints (which, perhaps, may be equally thrown away) leading to such reflections as might enable you to bear, with more patience, the incapacities which the law has laid upon you as a Dissenter.

Since we believe ourselves, after all your arguments to the contrary, strictly justifiable, as members of society, and as christians, in defending our civil and ecclesiastical establishment; and since the restraints, under which you lie, are barely sufficient for its defence, this is *our warrant* for imposing those restraints, and should be *your motive* for cheerfully submitting to them.

Another motive might be, that we leave you in possession of all those immunities which concern your happiness; of all, which we can allow, with safety to ourselves. But our safety, *you say*, would be ascertained by the *inoffensive* and *unambitious* disposition of the Dissenters. Possibly so. This is a fair promise; but, unfortunately, there would be no Court to which we could appeal, to compel

the performance of it. You offer us your *note of hand*, but we would rather keep your *hand*.— You affect to consider the violence employed by an irregular populace, as a proof that the friends of the church have no better argument to produce. And what connexion, pray, would you insinuate, between the casual fury of a mob, and the state of any controversy which you can here allude to; whether concerning points of policy, or articles of faith? Consider, Sir, even cowardice is not cruel, when its fears are hushed. The church of England has, at present, no need to maintain her cause by violence. She is in safe possession, and may sit still.

I am not surprised to find you *here* tacitly confessing, what you have *elsewhere* openly boasted, that you, and your friends *have* “aimed “a blow” at the church. To boast of that, which, at the same time, we know and believe to be culpable, is a kind of behaviour usually described by so harsh a term, that, if possible, I will force myself to think you, in this instance, *only mistaken*. Yet the mistake of thinking such conduct just and proper, at a time when you enjoy the most ample toleration, appears to me so palpable that I cannot conceive how you have fallen into it. Your application of the epithets “cowardly “and brutal” (which might have been descriptive enough,

enough, perhaps, if restricted to the excesses of the populace, but with which you have rather chosen to compliment the whole body of your "late townsfolk and neighbours") is no more consistent with justice, than if you should bestow those appellations, which you thought due to a highwayman or common robber, upon the inhabitants of the district in which his depredations were committed. Your scriptural illustration of "sheep and wolves," is liable to the same objection. The conduct of plunderers and incendiaries is indeed analogous to that of beasts of prey; but are the inhabitants of Birmingham, who frequent a church rather than a meeting-house, a body of plunderers and incendiaries? As for the resemblance of the Dissenters, on this occasion, to sheep, I take it to consist simply in their wanting power to act an offensive part.

Here, Sir, I close my remarks upon your celebrated address to the inhabitants of Birmingham. Although it is not of the least moment to you, or to any one, to know *who I am*, yet it may be of some consequence that it should be known *who I am not*. I suppose it needless to say that I am a member of the church of England; but it may be proper to mention, that I am not an inhabitant of Birmingham, or of its vicinity. I am not privately connected with any of those persons, to whom you
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might most naturally look for animadversions upon your manifesto. I have heard that the public papers teem with replies to you, some of them, I fear, in no very decent language; but I am equally unacquainted with the authors, or their productions. You will not suspect that I have employed my time in reading, since the appearance of your address. As to the motives which have induced me to take up my feeble pen against so experienced a controversialist, I shall only explain myself in the same negative manner in which I have guarded against the assignment of my performance to any hand guilty of the charge. I assure you then, Sir, that I am not paid, prompted, nor instructed to write; nor have I been supplied with secret information. My design has not even been previously communicated to any man living. I am unknown to you, and to your friends. I neither have reason to expect any injury from your party, nor any favour from those whom you consider as your adversaries. And, I trust, I am as far above the suspicion of insincerity, as I am beneath the hope of distinction in a personal competition with Dr. Priestley.

These declarations, Sir, I have thought proper to make, both for the sake of the cause which I espouse, and in order to prevent, as far as it lies in my power, the possibility, that the suspicion of
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having produced these reflections (if unfortunately they shall be thought deserving of censure) might affix a temporary discredit to some respectable name. I have now only to add, that I am,

Reverend Sir,

A sincere well-wisher to your *true* interests,

And, in the most extensive sense,

A Friend to Toleration.

BIRMINGHAM, JULY 30, 1791.

Dr. Priestley's Letter,
TO THE
INHABITANTS OF BIRMINGHAM.

My late Townsmen and Neighbours,

AFTER living with you eleven years, in which you had uniform experience of my peaceful behaviour, in my attention to the quiet studies of my profession, and those of philosophy, I was far from expecting the injuries which I and my friends have lately received from you. But you have been misled. By hearing the Dissenters, and particularly the Unitarian Dissenters, continually railed at, as enemies to the present Government, in Church and State, you have been led to consider any injury done to us as a meritorious thing; and not having been better informed, the means were not attended to. When the *objest* was right, you thought the *means* could not be wrong. By the discourses of your teachers, and the exclamations of your superiors in general, drinking confusion and damnation to us (which is well known to have been their frequent practice) your bigotry has been excited to the highest pitch, and nothing having been said to you to moderate your passions, but every thing to inflame them; hence, without any consideration on your part, or on theirs, who ought to have known, and taught you better—

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you were prepared for every species of outrage, thinking that whatever you could do to spite and injure us, was for the support of Government, and especially the Church. In *destroying us*, you have been led to think, *you did God* and your country the most substantial *service*.

Happily, the minds of Englishmen have a horror of *murder*, and therefore you did not, I hope, think of *that*; though, by your clamorous demanding of *me* at the Hotel, it is probable that, at that time, some of you intended me some personal injury. But what is the value of life, when every thing is done to make it wretched. In many cases, there would be greater mercy in dispatching the inhabitants, than in burning their houses. However, I infinitely prefer what I feel from *the spoiling of my goods*, to the disposition of those who have misled you.

You have destroyed the most truly valuable and useful apparatus of philosophical instruments that perhaps any individual, in this or any other country, was ever possessed of, in my use of which I annually spent large sums, with no pecuniary view whatever, but only in the advancement of science, for the benefit of my country and of mankind. You have destroyed a library corresponding to that apparatus, which no money can re-purchase, except in a long course of time. But what I feel far more, you have destroyed *manuscripts*, which have been the result of the laborious study of many years, and which I shall never be able to re-compose; and this has been done to one who never did, or imagined you any harm.

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I know nothing more of the *head-bill*, which is said to have enraged you so much, than any of yourselves, and I disapprove of it as much; though it has been made the ostensible handle of doing infinitely more mischief than any thing of that nature could possibly have done. In the celebration of the French Revolution, at which I did not attend, the company assembled on the occasion, only expressed their joy in the emancipation of a neighbouring nation from tyranny, without intimating a desire of any thing more than such an improvement of our own Constitution, as all sober citizens, of every persuasion, have long wished for. And though, in answer to the gross and unprovoked calumnies of Mr. Madan, and others, I publicly vindicated my principles as a Dissenter, it was only with plain and sober argument, and with perfect good humour. We are better instructed in the mild and forbearing spirit of Christianity, than ever to think of having recourse to *violence*; and can you think such conduct as yours any recommendation of your religious principles in preference to ours?

You are still more mistaken, if you imagine that this conduct of yours has any tendency to serve your cause, or to prejudice ours. It is nothing but *raisons* and *argument* that can ever support any system of religion. Answer our arguments, and your business is done; but your having recourse to *violence*, is only a proof that you have nothing better to produce. Should you destroy myself, as well as my house, library, and apparatus, ten more persons, of equal or superior spirit and ability, would instantly rise up. If those ten were destroyed,

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an hundred would appear; and believe me, that the Church of England, which you now think you are supporting, has received a greater blow by this conduct of yours, than I and all my friends have ever aimed at it.

Besides, to abuse those who have no power of making resistance, is equally cowardly and brutal, peculiarly unworthy of Englishmen, to say nothing of Christianity, which teaches us to do as we would be done by. In this business we are the sheep, and you the wolves. We will preserve our character, and hope you will change yours. At all events, we return you blessings for curses; and pray that you may soon return to that industry, and those sober manners, for which the inhabitants of Birmingham were formerly distinguished.

I am your sincere well-wisher,

J. PRIESTLEY.

London, July 19, 1791.

As an idea has pretty universally prevailed, that the Clergy of the Church of England have been busy in fomenting that spirit which has broken out into such illegal violences against DR. PRIESTLEY, and his Dissenting Friends, we are happy to find it compleatly obviated by the following Address, which breathes a spirit of liberality and good sense that is truly edifying. We rejoice that the Clergy have taken so proper a step; and hope that, however appearances may have favoured the idea of their having exulted in the late events, they will now be entirely exculpated by the candour of a discerning public.

ADDRESS not YET signed, from the BISHOPS and CLERGY of the CHURCH of ENGLAND to the REV. DR. PRIESTLEY.

WHEN outrages against the public peace have been committed, which bear the strongest presumptive marks of having been fomented by a particular body of men, it becomes all of that body who possess the sentiments of moderation to declare their protest against such outrages, and to disclaim the authors of them. We, the Ministers of the Gospel of Peace, think that the conduct of the Clergy of the Church of England has been made the pretext for disturbing the peace of society, violating the property, endangering the lives of individuals, and disgracing our country in the eyes of all Europe. We have to lament that there still exists so much of the spirit of bigotry; and that our pious labours have failed of enlightening the people in so material a point. With regard to yourself, Sir, we cannot be insensible to the enmity you bear against our hierarchy, and we shall be glad to see you silenced by your answerers, but we would not have you burnt by the mob. We owe you no affection, but we conceive we have no right to do you injury. We enjoy too much ourselves from the favour and protection of the law, to wish to throw down its fences; and we are sensible, that when our own houses are of glass, it would be bad policy in us to begin breaking of windows. We beg you to believe, that, as most of us have studied at the University, we are able to understand a figure of speech, and can distinguish between real and metaphorical gun-powder; that we do not think hard words properly answered by throwing stones, or arguments confused by pulling down houses.

We are of opinion that a pen is a lawful, and a bludgeon an unlawful weapon; and that, as pamphlets, however severe, break no bones, they are unfairly retaliated by

a shower of brick-bats. We cannot help suspecting there is an absurdity in a man's shewing his zeal for the constitution by breaking the king's peace, nor can we think that any project of amending the laws is quite so dangerous as the open violation of them.

Moreover, we consider ourselves, as connected with you by the collateral studies of our profession; and tho' we cannot join with you as a Theologian, we respect you as a Philosopher. We sincerely lament the loss the learned world has sustained by the destruction of your labours, and the instruments of your future labours, and we feel shame and indignation at the thought that, while other nations are improving in science and liberality, this Country will be branded with the reproach of fanaticism worthy only of barbarous ages and nations. As Churchmen we cannot but dislike you; but as men we sympathize with you; as scholars we venerate you; as Christians we admire the meekness with which you have expressed yourself on so trying an occasion; and as Englishmen we regret, that after having done honour to you, we should be called upon to forgive your Country.

We are sensible, that nothing can bring so great an odium upon your opponents as the late proceedings; and we do not love you well enough to wish you the crown of martyrdom. With regard to our own interests, we can desire nothing better than to keep things quiet; and are sensible, that the agitation of the public mind, would in the end be less formidable to you than to ourselves.

Signed, &c.

